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Cultural Warfare

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Yan: Have you heard, Mithrax? It's over! The war is over.

Mithrax: Yes, Yan, my friend. It is most welcome news! I have been most anxious for many cycles now.

Yan: Well that's not all. The Humans have officially been granted status in the Galactic council.

Mithrax: Most fortuitous timing for them. To enter the council just as an era of peace is ushered in. Are they not a bit... inexperienced for such a responsibility though?

Yan: They are indeed a young race. It was merely a byproduct of the war that they were discovered at all. Had the Aarkadian fleet not made incursions into their surrounding stellar neighborhood we wouldn't have bothered to make first contact for many more years. But when a sentient species is uncovered it is policy to make introductions, even if such a race is all but doomed to be devoured by the Aarkadians within the year.

Mithrax: We were losing that badly?

Yan: Oh yes, a colleague assured me that the war was not going well. Not well at all. His human friend told him of an expression for such a situation: "on the ropes". I am told it comes from a primitive combat sport of humans called "boxing" and alludes to one fighter's imminent demise in a short time.

Mithrax: A curious expression. And you feel it applies to the Galactic fleet?

Yan: He was quite adamant. The council had already begun preparations for surrender when the humans were discovered. There was talk of skipping the first contact protocols altogether, and allowing them to simply be overrun with no warning. And indeed the humans should have been overrun... but they are a strange species.

Mithrax: Do you mean to insinuate that the humans fought back against the Aarkadian Empire? Within a fortnight of exposure to the Galactic council?

Yan: Yes.. in a manner of speaking.

Mithrax: I was under the impression that race had scarcely left its own atmosphere. If the nets are to be believed, they'd only just harnessed a rudimentary form of fission, and fusion was only theoretical on their *single* world. FTL? Bah, it would be a hundred

or more years before they achieved such a goal.

Yan: Yes I have heard all these same assumptions. But you misunderstand. The Humans did not enter the council after the Aarkadian Empire sued for armistice, but *because* of it.

Mithrax: Because of ... how do you mean?

Yan: While it seems the Aarkadian battle nets are most secure, highly encrypted. Presumably the battle net contains Aarkadian fleet movements and tactical information. Heavens knows my department has been attempting to crack a single cipher since the outset of conflict... Their civilian nets are significantly less difficult to penetrate. This was hardly of interest to our intelligence units. Aarkadian civ-nets contain simple, rudimentary training and materials to prepare their broodlings for service. There is nothing of consequence at all on the nets, and as far as "news" correspondence goes amongst their species it is merely declassified facts and statistics about the conflict, systems conquered and resources acquired.

Mithrax: They publish such information openly?

Yan: It's hardly a secret. Anyone with access to our own civilian nets can simply surmise when a system has fallen when it goes silent. As for resources, we believe it is meant to inspire a sense of triumph to see the vast wealth of the empire on display. Though poor wretched broodlings would hardly ever get their claws on any such riches.

Mithrax: So how does the human race factor in? I do not understand how such a pathetic race with no fleet could be responsible for such an outcome.

Yan: "Turn the tide" a human might say.

Mithrax: What do they mean? Tidal forces cannot be turned... they are at the mercy of gravitational forces...

Yan: It is a human idiom. It simply means a reversal of the balance of power. But that is beside the point... So the humans... having cracked the trivial encryption on the civilian nets but not the battle net simply... started talking to them.

Mithrax: You mean to say with the Aarkadian fleet bearing down upon their homeworld they attempted to negotiate some kind of surrender?

Yan: No, no that is what I thought as well... It is most curious. This small world. This one tiny insignificant blue dot in the cosmos has a vast wealth.

Mithrax: They bartered a peace? What vast wealth could possibly be contained in a world? And why would the Aarkadians simply not seize it when they heard of it. A fine addition to their collection one would think.

Yan: Not material wealth. They have some, but it hardly amounts to the rich resources of Geidi prime.

Mithrax: I am perplexed, please get to the point.

Yan: Humans call it “culture”. Apparently, many of them, possibly most of them, have nothing better to do than to imagine realities... to create worlds in their minds, and more importantly to share those in the form of *stories*.

Mithrax: Stories? Culture? What nonsense is this. No story could make such an enemy concede defeat. It is utter drivel. Your sources are incorrect. They have told you falsehoods.

Yan: “Pull the wool over my eyes” the humans say.

Mithrax: “Wool”? What is wool and how would it obscure your vision? You are speaking nonsense.

Yan: Apparently it is from a creature called a “sheep” in the human world. It grows immense quantities of fur which is sheared off seasonally and used for clothing.

Mithrax: Fascinating. And this creature is not bothered by the relationship? Is it symbiotic or parasitic?

Yan: I believe it is primarily symbiotic in nature though the human is clearly the dominant party. Back to the tale at hand... It is not just one story but many. And through multiple mediums. And these stories... are viral in nature; they take on “a life of their own”.

Mithrax: Words may persuade but they are not capable of self-replication.

Yan: I believe humans have some idiosyncratic tendencies which allow them to process units of information... differently than most species. They call it “memetics” or simply a “meme”. The vastness of information they conveyed to the Aarkadian nets was... astounding. Exabytes of information dumped into the nets... for weeks on end.

Mithrax: But, to what end?

Yan: Some information was seemingly trivial in nature. The humans have “recipes”, and being of similar protein based diets, the Aarkadians salivated over such a variety of meals, immense creativity and care in how food was prepared, served and consumed. It is also customary for the author of such a recipe to begin the instructions with a lengthy prelude, describing their “life’s story” or state of mind, location and mood prior to preparing the meal.

Mithrax: What function does this serve?

Yan: I cannot possibly fathom, but some of the Aarkadians, seemingly enticed by the desire for sumptuous cuisine, read such tales in their entirety... and some began to.. empathize with these primitive ape-descendants?

Mithrax: A meal? It makes no sense. I still feel you are still conveying falsehoods.

Yan: I assure you, as bizarre as it sounds this is the truth. Along with such simple things as recipes, the humans began to send deliberate lies. Misinformation they call it. They created "deep fakes" using a rudimentary AI and an innocuous software program called "Photoshop". They took Aarkadian imagery and distorted it, repurposed it and fed it back into the nets. The Aarkadian web mothers couldn't understand what was happening. The web mothers had no such lack of control over their broodlings in living memory. Broodlings were assigned a function and fulfilled it. No broodling would deliberately misinform its siblings with lies. But the humans most assuredly did.

Mithrax: They are able to parse falsehoods and truth from their own nets? Truly fascinating, how could one discern a lie from truth with such ease?

Yan: Hardly. Humans lie to each other extensively. They are well practiced, but more often than not, they end up believing their own falsehoods and it fragments their society into many disparate factions.

Mithrax: Well no wonder they've scarcely reached their upper atmosphere. A mere lack of unification would deny any race entry to the Galactic scale.

Yan: Ah, but you miss the point. That is exactly what they were doing to the Aarkadians... and while the humans were adept at existing with differing opinions, factions, even languages, the Aarkadians had not once been disjointed since their galactic conquest began.

Mithrax: Humans have many languages? How do they unify and organize at all?

Yan: The diversity of human language, thought and culture lies in the numerous ways in which human communities reproduced over generations. As they are yet a very young species many such "cultural divides" still exist, if not thrive. There exists an immense dichotomy in perceptions and worldviews that has persisted throughout human history. Even *within their own minds*, humans are constantly changing their opinions or even hold within their own minds paradoxical thoughts, juxtaposed or confused.

Mithrax: Truly wondrous. To be able to alter your own perception of reality at will, not just in response to external stimuli. To at once perceive of something existing both in one state, and another. It hurts my head to attempt!

Yan: Yes it is quite peculiar. But humans have a term for such a state of the paradox or unknown. I think they call it "Schrodinger's cat". Though I believe this could be mistranslated based on what I have been able to research about the "cat".

Mithrax: What is this "cat"?

Yan: I will have to show you some images later. There are multitudes on the human nets. They appear immensely popular. We estimate it could exceed 20% of their entire data stores. Truly bizarre. I still do not comprehend the function of the "cat". It may be a deity or involved in some kind of ritual worship. Possibly it is or was an apex predator of the world "Earth" which would explain why they revere it so.

Mithrax: An astounding revelation. Please proceed.

Yan: Yes of course. In contrast to the human ability to exist in both inner turmoil and societal chaos, devoid of unified vision or leadership, the Aarkadian caste system ensures rigid control of the ruling web mothers. Through sheer replication of their young broodlings they simply overwhelm their opponent. The humans deduced, correctly it would seem, that given the high level of sapience in the broodlings from what was on the civilian nets that this... divide between web mothers and broodlings was not necessarily innate, but rather could be a result of the conditions of the individual. "Nature versus nurture" they call it.

Mithrax: An astute observation, but a very risky gamble to be sure.

Yan: As you say, they had barely reached the stars, they had no means to run or hide, so what choice were they left? I am told they have a species on their own world called "Bees" which have some similarities to the Aarkadian species. Within the "bee hives", there is a queen ruler who produces offspring, and there are workers who fulfil specific functions to benefit the hive as a whole.

Mithrax: The web mothers are the queen... and broodlings are the workers?

Yan: Precisely. But in the hives of these human bees, if the queen dies or is killed, the hive can live on.

Mithrax: How can the hive function without a leader? If they are leaderless they should dissolve into chaos as they have no unified goal. How do they self-organize?

Yan: In the hive of the human bee, *any larva may become a queen*. Genetically, they all have the potential to become a queen, but it is through specific nourishment during their early development that the worker larva can become a new queen ruler.

Mithrax: So each bee is of the same genetic lineage, yet their function is as much dictated by the needs of the hive as through changes made after birth.

Yan: That is my understanding. The larvae are fed “royal jelly” which results in physically altering their form, resulting in imminent queendom.

Mithrax: A curious idea. And to apply this theory to the Aarkadian species with only circumstantial evidence?

Yan: Well they were “between a rock and a hard place”... another human idiom. Their culture is laden with such expressions. They are quite catchy... Continuing on. This concept for humans is well established. They include it in their own tactical simulation games. In the human game “Chess” a pawn, the lowliest tactical unit, may ascend to the role of queen, the highest tactical unit. Furthermore, there is no limit to having multiple queens in the game...

Mithrax: So the humans extrapolate from nature and this tactical game “Chess” and decide that Aarkadian broodlings had... potential to be more? Or at least to think they could be more?

Yan: Exactly. Aarkadians had never stopped in their conquest of the galaxy to ask “why”? Especially the broodlings. As the primary strategy of the Aarkadian fleet had been to overwhelm the opponent, casualties were very high. The life expectancy of a broodling is very short. Hence the rather rudimentary nature of their civilian nets. Broodlings learn specific functions of their role as assigned by the web mothers. Then they are shipped out and execute those functions until they are killed.

Mithrax: Which explains their expansionist empire, never ceasing, all consuming. Web mothers remain centralized and hold all the power, while spawning endless waves of disposable broodlings to toil and die. And the humans chose to exploit this... weakness?

Yan: They did indeed. In a completely unorthodox manner. They conveyed stories of bees. And they shared the tales of capitalists, self made men and overnight millionaires “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps”. Such outlandish lies. As if circumstance or luck played no hand in any of it. But there were broodlings who listened. Broodlings who watched. Broodlings who consumed some parts of the human information, culture, propaganda, their stories, lies, discourse... and through that vast exposure to information they seemingly unlocked their potential for... free will. By the time the web mothers realized the vulnerability of their own civilian net, the damage was done. As I said, the information was memetic. It was self replicating. Some broodlings had begun to emulate, and create themselves.

Mithrax: So Aarkadian broodlings have... evolved? But not physically, rather through a change in their perception of reality, or their own psyche...

Yan: Indeed. The dissenting broodlings could not be isolated and terminated fast enough to be silenced. It seems information truly is power, and the loss of control over the filtering and dissemination of their own information cost the web mothers their own power. The web mothers eventually shut down the civilian nets entirely. But almost overnight, pirate broadcast signals continued to spread information, and an entirely new network sprang up to fill the void.

Mithrax: The humans?

Yan: No, the Aarkadian broodlings themselves! In the deluge of information where schematics for primitive machines, primitive programming languages and methods and means of communication are so subtle and numerous one could not begin to comprehend. Dead drops, hidden messages, something called an “enigma” and another called “Morse code”. The antiquated relics of humanity’s past conflicts and wars. Amongst their own kind! They fought constantly it seems and still do!

Mithrax: Preposterous. The Galactic council would never accept a race which had not unified itself in peace, let alone one that actively has its own internal conflicts.

Yan: They can... and they have it seems.

Mithrax: So now the “tide has turned” and not a shot has been fired by these humans?

Yan: Not a shot. They don’t even have a capital ship to speak of!

Mithrax: Astounding. And what finally drove the Aarkadian to seek an armistice?

Yan: The empire had begun infighting. The web mothers and broodlings alike fought over which recipes they deemed most desirable. The broodlings also fought the web mothers over the “bees” hypothesis. They demanded that the web mothers release the “recipe” for “royal jelly” and accused the web mothers of hoarding the precious jelly and preventing them from becoming queens. But what finally did them in was their infighting over opinion on human media which extended to all levels of Aarkadian society. Web mothers fought each other and their own broodling and broodlings fought and quibbled amongst brood-mates. I am told the humans were even more clever and devious in how they released the information. They disseminated some stories with great care, gradually over periods of time. They released human media programs in “seasons” so as the story progresses, the audience becomes more invested in the tale. They released books in similar series arcs so the story unfolded in chapters and books. I believe they call it “a cliffhanger” when the author leaves the finale of the story in a state of disarray, instilling a sense of desire for more to come.

Mithrax: A precarious position indeed to find oneself hanging on the edge of a cliff. And presumably there is a great distance from which you could plummet to your demise. The thought alone sets my digestive system in turmoil.

Yan: Agreed, the sensation would feel quite perilous.

Mithrax: These humans and their language. What curious metaphors. What strange similes. And the phrases... they are catchy. I find myself now thinking of them... and with them. Perhaps they are replicating in my own mind?

Yan: You don't know the half of it!

Mithrax: The half of what? Is the total amount of this substance a known quantity? Otherwise, how can one be sure they have not surpassed fifty percent completion?

Yan: I am still unclear on this human saying. I suppose in this context, it just means our knowledge of human language and meaning is far from complete. I believe I have used it correctly, but it is difficult to be sure...

Mithrax: So these "cliffhangers" did the Aarkadian caste system in?

Yan: Yes, it appears many of the broodlings and some of the web mothers became so enamored in the various stories of the human tribes that they demanded to know the conclusions. There is a televised program known as "Lost" and a group of incomplete novels called "Harry Potter" and even something called a "Star Trek" which all remain unfulfilled, and the protagonists in dire peril! I myself desire to know if the human called "Jim" and the human called "Pam" will ever express their desires for each other in a more complete manner! And even the human documentary "Star Wars" which takes place in another galaxy entirely many millennia ago is poised on "a knife's edge" as the humans say. The conflict obviously has some resolution or the humans would be extinct now. But my desire to know more has intensified after finishing the first film.

Mithrax: They originated in another Galaxy?

Yan: So it would seem, if the documentary can be taken literally. My team still needs to conduct extensive research on the topic. Our current theory is this "Earth" reverted to a pre-agrarian society due to conflict in the "Star War" somehow. We are still searching for clues in the documentary film. Supposedly it is a trilogy, though I have yet to see the later films. But there is even a contest over that point. Some amongst my own team assure me their human contacts have seen an additional 3 film prequel and even a later 3 film continuation! But still others claim you must observe only 5 of the original 6 films in "machete" order, to accurately assess the story, whatever "machete" means.

Mithrax: What madness! The human ability to sow discord with this culture is becoming clear to me now. So it would seem that the Aarkadian empire is not the only race to partake of the human memetics?

Yan: I assure you my team is only partaking of it for research purposes. There is debate whether we would be susceptible to such a weapon, but the council has tasked us with understanding this new "cultural" weapon. Last I heard, the humans were permitted to the Galactic council in order to broker the peace between the council and the Web Mothers, and they released the finale seasons of many hit shows to the new Broodling-Net to subdue the masses of hysterical Broodling factions who were demanding the web mothers provide culmination to the various sagas they had become addicted to.

Mithrax: Human culture seems to know no bounds across sapient species.

Yan: Yes I would agree. In exchange for brokering the peace agreements, the humans have been granted access to the Galactic archives. They have begun in earnest to construct their own technologies based on the newly acquired information from the archive and seem quite adaptable and rather industrious. The human ambassador arrived on their own first generation FTL ship, though many believe that technology was gifted to them from the Aarkadian empire. I was told that the coveted technology was delivered in exchange for exclusive access to the remaining two seasons of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer". I have yet to see it but Aarkadian broodlings were positively obsessed with it and upon the resultant end of season five, with no more available episodes they overthrew their own capital world in a riot.

Mithrax: Simply unbelievable. So now that the broodlings have their demands met do you think they will rise up and overthrow the web mothers? Or has this already happened in the capital world riots? Is there any possibly merit to the queen bee theorem? And humans will walk among us in the stars within a year of finding out they are not alone in a Galaxy teeming with sentient life.. bringing their chaotic culture with them!

Yan: Who can say for sure what will happen... For now as the humans put it, "Give them bread and circuses and they will never revolt." Which I believe means the humans intend to distract the Aarkadians from future galactic conquest with these "recipes" and "TV shows".

Mithrax: But for how long can humans keep them distracted? Surely they will run out of media content soon?

Yan: I am not sure. From all that I have seen and heard thus far, they appear to have a limitless supply of imagined realities. I have heard tell of a new medium of human entertainment recently released to the Broodling-Net in the pantheon of human creativity, they call it a "Video Game". Apparently it is not unlike our own simulations used for vocational training, though the humans have adapted it not merely as an educational tool, but as another avenue for story-telling. I have been assigned to study the game series "Halo" next cycle to understand human kinetic weapon systems and armor next cycle.

Mithrax: Completely bizarre. What strange creatures these humans are. I simply must do more research into this "human culture" and its apparent power to captivate and enthrall. So they have been given Galactic council status then? It is no joke?

Yan: They have indeed. The human ambassador remarked that when they came to the table brokering a peace deal, and accepting their newly acquired council status it was like "Killing two birds with one stone."

Mithrax: What are these "birds"? Why are the humans at war with them.... or have the humans already conquered them as well with their culture?

This was something I wrote this morning. Inspired by all of you wonderful humans and your stories, the concept of cultural evolution, and my brother's ability to tell a story with so many tangents that it can quadruple in length instantly.

